

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

October 12, 2005

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DR. SMITH ATTENDS EDUCATION CONFERENCE IN HONG KONG

INDIANAPOLIS—State Rep. Vernon G. Smith (D-Gary) attended an education conference in Hong Kong in late September that focused on how leaders in various fields can bring civility and positive reinforcement back into the classroom.

The 2005 Invitational Education World Leadership Institute, which took place Sept. 27-30, brought together recognized leaders in education and government. Dr. William Purkey and Betty Siegel, the co-founders of the International Alliance for Invitational Education were keynote speakers at the conference. Those attending participated in daily seminars and workshops. In addition, they visited various schools in Hong Kong where Invitational Education is practiced.

"It is remarkable about how inviting these schools are for their students," said Dr. Smith, who is an education professor at the Indiana University Northwest. "It was a wonderfully warm atmosphere where there was total respect from the teachers for the students and from the students for the teachers. There is a 'connectiveness' there that I haven't seen here in the United States. Even though the students and schools were not wealthy, everything was absolutely clean. The halls and classrooms were immaculate and the uniforms spotless even though many of these students would have to hand-wash their clothing each night.

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"Something else that intrigued me was that all the children were 'on-task' even though the class sizes were large," continued Dr. Smith. "The schools were truly student-centered. They even had different sized desks to fit the needs of the students themselves. If these Hong Kong schools, which are not wealthy, can implement such positive changes, then surely the United States can move forward toward the creation of an educational system that offers respect for every child and teacher as well as the ability to structure programs to meet the individual needs of the students."

Dr. Smith said the schools he visited in Hong Kong put into practice three educational theories discovered in the United States, but still not widely practiced in our country.

One is consideration of attention span. Even though the school day is longer at these particular Chinese schools, there are more breaks to decrease the monotony the students experience.

The second theory is the realization that there are different styles of learners and the approach to education must be centered on the particular learning needs of the student.

The third is the "invitational education" program that seeks to value and recognize the strengths of every student while helping the child improve on weaknesses. Dr. Smith said the program breaks down the emotional, intellectual, physical, and psychological barriers that prevent young people from achieving their true potential.

Peter Yarrow, of the famous Peter, Paul & Mary musical trio, also spoke at the conference. His address was titled, "Don't Laugh at Me." Yarrow is the founder and co-chair of Operation Respect.

"This was an enlightening conference," said Dr. Smith. "It reinforced that human potential, although not always apparent, exists in every person. We just have to make the effort to discover those talents and encourage each individual to share his or her gifts with the world. By returning civility to an uncivil society, we can reduce barriers to achievement and success."

